

Folk Gravesites in New Orleans: Arthur Smith Honors the Ancestors

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The cemeteries of New Orleans, often called "Cities of the Dead," are renowned for their elaborate above-ground tombs arranged like little houses along narrow, labyrinthine pathways. New Orleans' oldest existing cemetery, St. Louis Number One, established in 1789, is located just outside the original French settlement known today as the French Quarter. This cemetery is of particular interest because of its picturesque beauty and the many historically significant New Orleanians who are interred there. The free-standing tombs, each containing two or three vaults, are usually owned by middle and upper class families; large multi-vaulted "society tombs" are owned by benevolent and fraternal organizations. The cemetery walls also contain vaults that are often called "ovens" because they resemble an old-fashioned baker's oven, and are used by people of more modest means. In both the free-standing tombs and the ovens, individual vaults are used for successive interments, and many family or society members may be housed within the same vault. Decomposition is rapid in New Orleans' semi-tropical climate even when the dead are embalmed, and custom dictates that after "a year and a day," the casket may be discarded and any remaining bones deposited in the back of the vault, making room for the next occupant (Wilson and Huber 1962; Huber 1974; Florence 1996a:13-15; Florence 1997b:9-29).

In New Orleans, with its blend of Latin-Catholic and African traditions, gravesite decorations are as distinctive as the cemeteries themselves. Compared to typical American cemeteries, where idiosyncratic monuments and unconventional memorial decorations are discouraged or even prohibited, the cemeteries of New Orleans allow residents considerable license in the embellishment of their burial places. Some New Orleans cemeteries require that gravesites be kept reasonably tidy and in good repair, but in others, *anything goes*.

Within this exuberant style of cemetery decoration, one gravesite in St. Louis Cemetery Number One particularly attracted my attention. In 1986 I began to observe and photograph this highly individualized oven vault, located in the Basin Street wall just inside the main gate.¹ The niche and its protruding marble shelf, along with the path directly in front of them, form

an altar that is adorned with an ever-changing assemblage of objects. The focal point is always the same image of an African American woman wearing a wide-brimmed felt hat, derived from a studio photograph that has been repeatedly photocopied, enlarged, and hand colored. The portraits, which are carefully wrapped in plastic, bear the crudely lettered inscription:

Amanda Dorsey Boswell Carroll
Birthday. November-14-1892
Death. November-3-1945
At Rest. At Peace.

When I first saw the gravesite in 1986 it was decorated for St. Valentine's Day with pots of artificial flowers, Valentine's cards, sea shells, stones, and a whitewashed brick. In April of 1987, the portrait and some rocks and sea shells were placed in the niche, and on the path were more rocks, shells, flowers, plastic jugs, and baskets. In February, 1990, during the Carnival season, the decoration was more elaborate. The portrait of Amanda Carroll was flanked by plastic jugs of fresh flowers and greenery. A miniature garden of potted plants, surrounded by wire fencing, had been constructed on the path below. A brick was encased in a plastic wrapper with the printed slogan, "Make It a Memory."

In 1990 I began to notice X marks, inscribed with a piece of soft, red brick on the wall above the niche. In New Orleans this Afro-Catholic practice is customarily used to invoke the spirit of the dead, and a small offering, such as coins, food, flowers, whiskey, or a votive candle, is left at the gravesite as payment for services rendered. The tomb of legendary, nineteenth-century Voodoo Queen Marie Laveau, located just around the corner from Amanda Carroll's wall vault, is covered with Xs, and a variety of offerings are always seen on the surrounding pavement. Because Southern folk art, gravesite decoration, and New Orleans Voodoo² are consuming interests of mine, Amanda Carroll's enigmatic wall vault utterly intrigued me. Was this memorial kept by family members, by seekers of spiritual potency, by Voodoo worshippers? It even occurred to me that these funky assemblages might be created by a local artist who had simply appropriated the space.

After five years of fruitless inquiry,³ I finally encountered the keeper of the gravesite in March, 1991. Arthur Smith, the grandson of Amanda Dorsey Boswell Carroll, was at that time in his late fifties, a pleasant-looking, golden-skinned man with a wispy goatee. He was born on his grandmother's fortieth birthday, November 14, 1932. He has worked as a handy man, butler, dishwasher, insurance agent, photographer, florist, and door-to-door sales agent for the Fuller Cosmetics Company, but, he told me, he was presently unemployed and homeless, and supported himself by collecting and selling

recyclable bottles and cans. Smith is eligible for Social Security benefits, but has never received a check because he is reluctant to become involved with the government bureaucracy. Although Arthur Smith was raised in a Catholic family, he later became a Baptist. In the 1960s he opened his own church, but he soon abandoned this experiment and is not presently affiliated with any organized religion, adhering to a strictly personal interpretation of Christianity. Smith never married and has no close living relatives. Two of his grandparents and several other family members are interred in the wall vault, but there have been no recent interments because modern caskets are too large for the oven. Smith began his gravesite decoration when his mother died in 1978, and he presently cares for his grandmother's vault, his mother's grave uptown in the Carrollton Cemetery, and another grave at Holt Cemetery.⁴

I was curious to know if Amanda Carroll had been associated with African-based spiritual practices, as the X marks would indicate. Without mentioning Voodoo, I asked Arthur Smith if his grandmother had been a religious leader in the community. "No," he answered, "she spent her life caring for our family at home while my mother worked to support us. When I was a child I suffered terribly from asthma, and she doctored me with home remedies. I keep this memorial to her out of love and gratitude" (personal communication, 3/18/91). I later learned that the X marks are made by tourists who have been told by unprincipled tour guides that Amanda Dorsey Boswell Carroll was a "great Voodoo priestess of the 1930s and 40s" (Florence 1994; Romig 1995). A popular book of New Orleans ghost stories even implies, through inclusion of a photograph of Amanda Carroll's wall vault in the chapter on Marie Laveau, that it is the burial place of Laveau's daughter, supposedly her successor as New Orleans' reigning Voodoo Queen (Klein 1993:97-105). Arthur Smith regards Voodoo as black magic and is offended by the characterization of his grandmother as a Voodoo practitioner. He tries to obliterate the X marks by painting over them.

When I first met Arthur Smith, there were many X marks and a few crosses on the wall behind the vault. The portrait of Amanda Carroll was hung with beads left over from Mardi Gras, and a "Thank You" sign, colored pink, rested against it. A piece of red carpeting adorned the path in front, and on it were arranged sea shells, small white stones, and bricks tied with yellow ribbons. At that time yellow ribbons were plentiful in New Orleans due to the celebration of the successful conclusion of Operation Desert Storm, the United States's involvement in the Persian Gulf War.

St. Louis Cemetery Number One was renovated in 1992. Tombs and walls were repaired and whitewashed, and for the next few years Arthur Smith's embellishment of his grandmother's gravesite was not as flamboyant as it had been previously. He seemed to be inhibited by the pristine white surface, so different from the crumbling brick and stucco of the old cemetery

wall. On November 1, 1993, All Saints' Day,⁵ the occasion on which graves are traditionally cleaned and decorated in New Orleans, Smith's embellishments were limited to whitewashed bricks and potted red chrysanthemums. One new feature had appeared, however. In addition to the portrait of Amanda Carroll, there were also photocopied portraits of Smith's mother, Ethel Boswell Davis, and of Smith himself as a younger man, labeled "Arthur Raymond Smith Gravesite." I also noticed that a few X marks had begun to reappear on the wall above the vault.

On another visit to the cemetery in March, 1995, I found the tomb rather sparsely decorated with whitewashed bricks, a board covered with carpet samples, a pot of flowers, a garland made of plastic bags knotted together, a votive candle, and the photocopied portraits of Amanda Carroll, Ethel Davis, and Arthur Smith. The Xs had been covered over with pale yellow paint.

In April, 1996, when I was in New Orleans for the Jazz and Heritage Festival, the tomb was bare and the portraits, soggy from a recent rain, lay crumpled behind some bricks. Fearing that Arthur Smith had finally joined his beloved grandmother in death, I telephoned Robert Florence, a New Orleans writer on cemetery history and one of the more conscientious tour guides, and was relieved to learn that my anxiety had been unfounded. Florence, who has befriended Arthur Smith, told me that Mr. Smith was quite alive, still trundling around New Orleans with a grocery cart in which he salvages recyclables and collects promising materials for his gravesite decoration, and becoming something of a celebrity among New Orleans collectors of "outsider" and "visionary" art.

Later that year, Florence and New Orleans artist Leslie Staub arranged for Arthur Smith to exhibit his hand colored and collaged, photocopied portraits at LeMieux, a gallery in the revitalized Warehouse District that specializes in Southern, particularly New Orleans-related, folk and folk-inspired art. Although there was some doubt whether Smith could be persuaded to attend the opening, Florence and his wife picked him up at the appointed time and drove him to the gallery. Dressed in a new outfit purchased for the occasion, Arthur Smith charmed the patrons, sold all of his pieces, and left with several hundred dollars cash. The Florences offered to send him home in a taxi, but he preferred to walk the considerable distance and stop at a bar for a celebratory drink. "That night," Smith said, "I felt like I'd won the Academy Award" (Florence, personal communication, 5/97). Since then his interest in producing "art" for sale has flagged, and his creative energy is once again devoted to his personal projects. He does, however, appreciate the recognition accorded him in newspaper articles and in Robert and Mason Florence's recently published book, *New Orleans Cemeteries: Life in the Cities of the Dead*. Smith has already incorporated copies of Mason Florence's photographs into his gravesite memorials (Florence and Florence, personal communication, 8/97).

On my most recent visit to New Orleans in May, 1997, Amanda Carroll's vault was resplendent with a fresh coat of bright purple paint. There were no Xs. Arthur Smith's collage/assemblage technique had taken a leap forward. Instead of simply wrapping the photocopied portraits in plastic and setting them on the ledge, the faces of his mother and grandmother were cut out and adhered to the wall; the hand coloring wandered gaily onto the purple background. The decorations included five bricks painted purple and many vases of flowers, all connected with red plastic ribbon.

On this trip I had resolved to photograph not only Amanda Carroll's vault in St. Louis One, but also to document the related gravesites at Carrollton Cemetery and Holt Cemetery. Far uptown at the Carrollton Cemetery, I easily recognized the grave of Arthur Smith's mother. Ethel Boswell Davis's burial place, which is in the ground, was covered with a blue sheet held down by a number of whitewashed bricks and stones and embellished with artificial flowers and colored ribbons. It was topped with the photocopied portrait of Mrs. Davis. A blue sheet, several stones, and Smith's own portrait also decorated the adjoining grave. It is apparently Smith's intention to be interred there next to his mother.

Holt Cemetery, on City Park Avenue behind the parking lot of Delgado College, was originally a burial ground for the indigent. There are no above-ground tombs at Holt. Some graves are delineated by pipe fencing or contained within raised "copings" made of cement or wood; some are covered with Astroturf. The markers are handmade and hand lettered. At Holt, people feel free to decorate as they please and to leave offerings for the dead: a can of beer, a rubber duck, a bingo card (Rose 1996:D4). Even in this environment, Arthur Smith's work stands out. Nobody seems to know who is buried in the grave that he tends; he considers it a memorial chapel for all the dead of Holt Cemetery. I first saw this gravesite on All Saints' Day, 1993—without my camera, unfortunately. At that time it was truly spectacular, surrounded by baby bed railing and wire garden fencing, and topped with a shag carpet, a tangle of lawn chairs, bicycle wheels, and various other artifacts. This display was apparently too much even for the patrons and caretakers of Holt Cemetery, and Smith was asked to clean it up. On my 1997 visit the grave was decorated only with a blue sheet, whitewashed stones, and artificial flowers. The focal point was a large plastic owl of the type used to scare away pigeons.

Florence had told me that I should also see Arthur Smith's house, the ultimate manifestation of his artistic vision. The tiny, narrow, single shotgun house is located in a predominantly black neighborhood below the French Quarter. Inside are remnants of Smith's short-lived church: a shrine room dedicated to the Heavenly Father, and a Queens' Room that memorializes Smith's mother and grandmother. Over the years the house, which has no

electricity or running water, has filled with junk. According to Florence, "Arthur doesn't really live there and he won't let anybody in; he says it's infested with rats. He sleeps at a homeless shelter or on the street" (personal communication, 5/97). The facade, the front steps, the door, the shutters, and the gate, which bears a "Beware of Dog" notice, are gaily striped and stippled with red paint, as is the collection of wire and plastic lawn chairs, metal grates, milk crates, and flower pots in front. The sidewalk is covered with a piece of red carpet. Stuck among the chairs and grates are artificial flowers, plastic toys, ribbons, and several commercially printed signs that announce, "New Orleans: Proud to Call It Home." While the neighbors feel kindly toward Arthur Smith and have no problem with his exterior decorations, they object to the rats and junk, and fear that the house is a fire hazard.⁶

How do Arthur Smith's house and gravesite decorations fit into the larger context of African and African American cemetery traditions and attitudes toward the dead?

In the traditional religions of Western and Central Africa, homeland of most African Americans who arrived via the slave trade, great reverence is shown for those who have lived a wise and virtuous life. Ancestral spirits serve as guides and advisors to the living, and are believed to withhold their assistance or even cause harm if they are not properly honored with an elaborate funeral and regular offerings (Herskovits 1990 [1941]:63, 197-206; Raboteau 1978:12-13). Among the Kongo people of Central Africa, for example, metal cooking pots, crockery, and glass bottles were placed on graves to ensure that the spirit would not return in search of these necessary items. Earth from a grave was often an ingredient in Kongo *nkisi* charms, as were white objects, representing the "white realm of the dead," and sea shells, which symbolize the water from whence the spirits came and to which they will return (Thompson 1983:117-21; MacGaffey 1993).

African-influenced gravesite decorations are found in African American cemeteries all over the South, where family and friends leave personal objects belonging to the dead for their subsequent use in the spirit world. These "grave goods" include cups and saucers, candy dishes, pitchers, medicine bottles, figurines, clocks, lanterns, automobile parts, and bed frames. The dishes and medicine bottles are often those used by the deceased during the final illness, and must be cracked so that the spirit of the vessel is released to serve its owner in the next world. Graves may also be ornamented with sea shells and outlined with bottles driven neck-down into the earth (Vlach 1978:139-47; Thompson 1983:132-42; Fenn 1985:42-47).

Just as Africans sought spiritual aid from the ancestors, African Americans may use the cemetery and the spirits of the dead for supernatural power. In the late 1930s and early 1940s both Harry Middleton Hyatt, in his monumental five-volume work, *Hoodoo-Conjure-Witchcraft-Rootwork*, and

the fieldworkers of the WPA Federal Writers' Project abundantly documented such practices all over the South. For example, magical charms incorporated graveyard dirt or shavings from a wooden grave marker, and other charms called for the burial in the cemetery of an image of the intended target of the charm or a bottle containing his or her bodily substances. Offerings, usually of money, were left to pay the dead for their assistance. Many of Hyatt's informants specified that the grave, and therefore the spirit, of a "sinner" should be used for evil work and the grave of a good Christian or an innocent child for beneficent magic. These practices were most prevalent in Louisiana and the Georgia and South Carolina Low Country, although they were documented all over the South (see Louisiana Writers' Project 1936-1941; Hyatt 1970a and 1970b; Georgia Writers' Project 1986 [1940]).

The cross marks and Xs found on Amanda Carroll's tomb, even though they are made by tourists who have little knowledge of their meaning, are in fact rooted in African tradition. In the religions of Africa, particularly that of the Kongo people, two crossed lines represent the intersection between the realm of the living and the realm of the spirits—a point of concentrated power. Archaeological evidence indicates that the cruciform symbol was formerly used by slaves in South Carolina, where earthenware vessels with Kongo-influenced crosses and Xs inscribed in their bottoms have been recovered from coastal river beds. It is thought that the vessels, containing magical ingredients, were ritually thrown into the water, the cross being drawn to establish contact with the spirits (Ferguson 1992:26,110-16).

The African cruciform became syncretized with the Christian cross in the Afro-Catholic religions of the New World, and is frequently seen in Santería and Vodou (Thompson 1983:108-15; Métraux 1972 [1959]:166). The New Orleans custom of drawing cross marks or Xs on the grave markers of persons believed to possess great spiritual authority, although not found elsewhere in the United States, is related to Haitian Vodou practice. It may have been introduced into New Orleans by the many Haitian immigrants who, fleeing the turmoil of Haiti's revolution, arrived in the early nineteenth century. According to Haitian Vodou priest Max Beauvoir, "the practice is called *kwasiyen*, meaning to sign with a cross, and is used to establish contact with the *lwa* [Vodou deities] and on tombs when one wishes to be remembered by the dead. It is an X sign, although some people transform it into a Christian-like cross" (personal correspondence, 9/13/97).

It was customary in the 1880s and 1890s to leave offerings of cooked food, fruit, whiskey, coins, or jewelry; burn a candle; draw cross marks; and perform charm rituals at the tombs of Marie Laveau and other spiritual leaders. WPA Louisiana Writers' Project fieldworkers documented these nineteenth-century practices in interviews with elderly, black New Orleanians who had grown up in the neighborhood of the French Quarter and the St.

Louis cemeteries. The tradition prevailed at least until 1940, as recorded by Zora Neale Hurston in 1928-1929 and by Hyatt and the Louisiana Writers' Project between 1936 and 1940. Local newspapers also reported the drawing of Xs and cross marks on the tombs and told of charms planted in the cemeteries for malign purposes. These charms sometimes took the form of symbolic ingredients like red pepper, along with the photograph or the name of the target of the charm, placed inside a calf's head or a beef heart or tongue, sewed up with black thread and stuck full of pins and needles.⁷

Arthur Smith's gravesite assemblages, according to his own statement, have no connection to Voodoo or conjure practices like those described above, nor does he leave offerings to his mother and grandmother to solicit their aid for magical purposes. His work, and the choice of materials such as whitewashed bricks and stones, sea shells, and the baby bed railing, certainly fall within the tradition of African and African American grave decoration and respect for departed ancestors, but it is not strictly analogous to the Kongo-influenced graves found all over the American South. Smith does not consciously leave these tributes on the gravesites of his relatives for their use in the afterlife. His decorations are a more personalized expression of love and respect for his hard-working mother and for the grandmother who raised and cared for him. He offers them Mardi Gras beads and Valentines, flowers, ribbons, and votive candles, and commemorates these two supremely important women with hand colored, photocopied portraits. By including his own portrait in recent years, he seems to be saying that he feels ever closer to the spirit world, and is ready to go when called.

Notes

¹ This was not initially conceived as a formal documentary project. On some visits I used color print or slide film, which could not be reproduced for this essay, and on other occasions I was not even carrying my camera.

² New Orleans Voodoo, closely related to Haitian Vodou, is an authentic Afro-Catholic religion concerned with serving the deities and the ancestors and soliciting their spiritual power. Denigrated and suppressed by the Anglo-Americans who took control after the Louisiana Purchase, Voodoo acquired the negative connotations of sorcery and devil-worship and is feared by many people who still accept this negative stereotype. There is, at present, no definitive reference work on New Orleans Voodoo. For a historic overview of New Orleans Voodoo and its African and Haitian antecedents, see Herskovits (1990 [1941]:245-51) and Raboteau (1978:75-82). For information on early twentieth-century Voodoo practice, see Hurston 1931, 1990 [1935], and Hyatt 1970a, 1970b. Tallant's *Voodoo in New Orleans* 1983 [1946] is a racist and sensationalistic interpretation of data compiled by the WPA Louisiana

Writers' Project; the original interviews and other material are housed at Northwestern State University, Natchitoches, Louisiana, in the Watson Memorial Library, Cammie G. Henry Research Center.

³ Neither the Louisiana State Museum, the Historic New Orleans Collection, nor the preservation group Save Our Cemeteries knew anything about the Amanda Carroll gravesite. The caretaker of the St. Louis Cemeteries said that it was against policy to divulge such information. By the time I discovered the work of cemetery historian Robert Florence in 1995, I had already solved the mystery for myself.

⁴ Biographical information supplied to me by Arthur Smith on March 18, 1991 was supplemented by conversations with Florence and by his published writings on Arthur Smith: "In Loving Memory," *New Orleans Times-Picayune* (11/1/94), and "Homage from the Heart," in *New Orleans Cemeteries* (1997b).

⁵ For more on the All Saints' Day celebration in New Orleans and its environs, see Saxon, Dreyer, and Tallant (1988 [1945]:316-65), Ronquillo (1979:15-18, plates 40-45), and Florence (1997b:31-50).

⁶ In a recent communication from Robert Florence, I learned that the city of New Orleans has condemned Arthur Smith's house. Florence is trying to help Smith collect social security and move into an apartment (personal communication, 2/7/98).

⁷ The drawing of cross marks or Xs is documented in unpublished interviews with Alexander Augustin, Cruz (caretaker of the St. Louis Cemeteries), Marie Dédé, Aileen Eugene, Oscar Felix, Anita Fonvergne, Theresa Kavanaugh, and Sophie Rey by Louisiana Writers' Project fieldworkers Hazel Breaux, Edmund Burke, Robert McKinney, Henriette Michinard, Zoe Posey, and Maude Wallace, 1936-1940, folder 25, and in a newspaper article, "Voodoo Faithful Put Magic Marks on Great Queen's Grave" *New Orleans Item* 1936. Charm rituals performed in the cemetery are documented in Hurston (1990 [1935]:223-24,227-29), Hyatt 1970a and 1970b, unpublished interviews with Madame Ducoyielle, Rachael Johnson, Josephine Jones, and Sophie Rey by Louisiana Writers' Project fieldworkers Robert McKinney and Zoe Posey, 1936-1940, folders 25 and 44, and in a newspaper article, "Voodoo Charm Found by Two Women on Mother's Grave" *Item Tribune* 1931.

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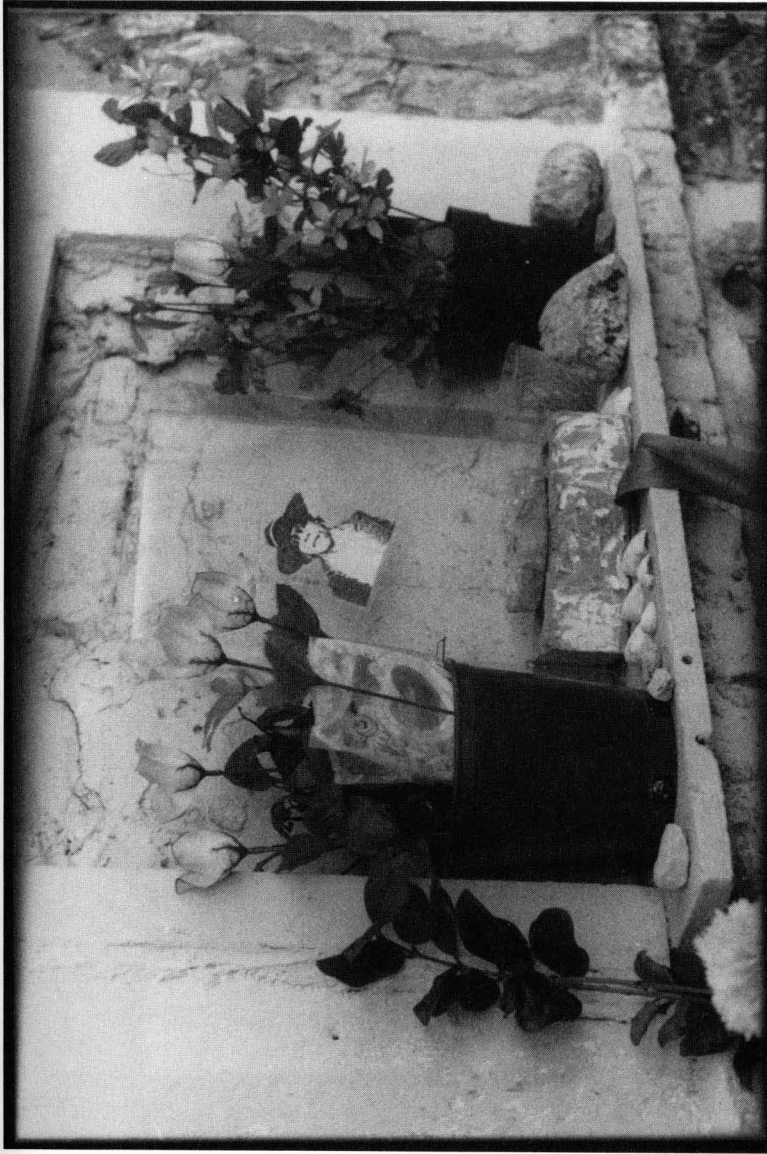
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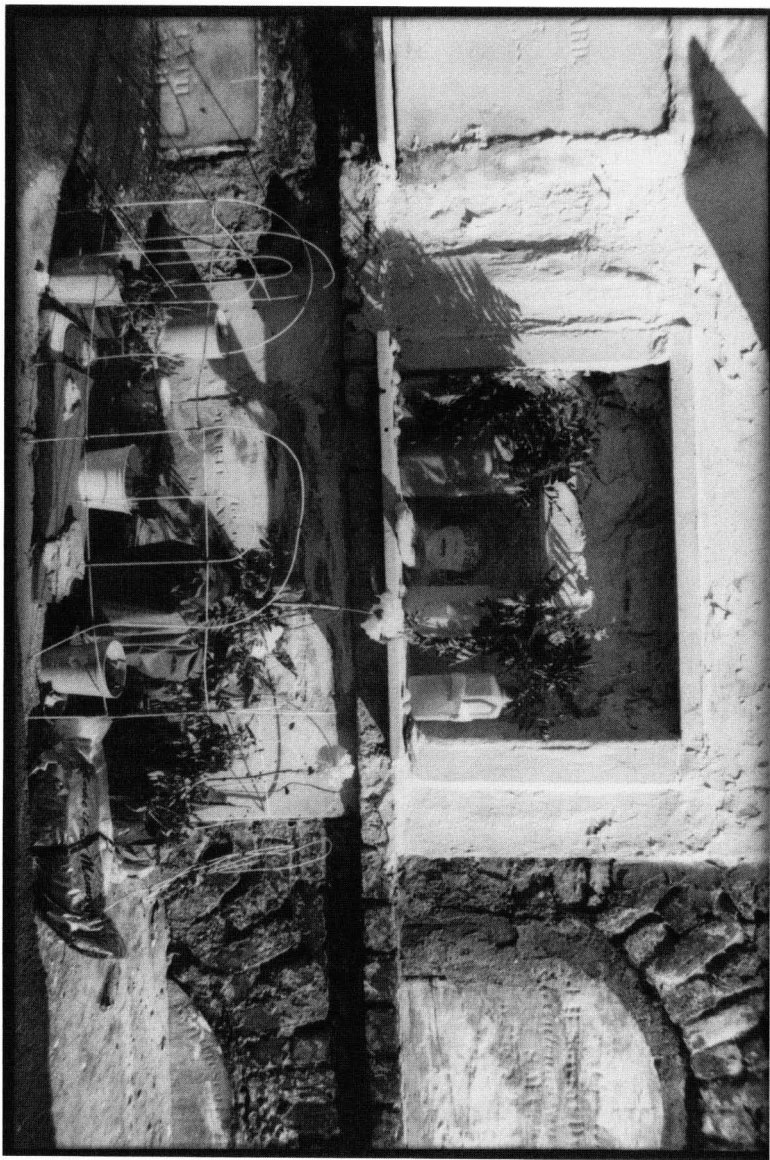
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1. View of St. Louis Cemetery Number One, February 8, 1987, showing wall vaults and raised tombs. Amanda Carroll's oven vault is in the Basin Street wall, just to the left of the main gate.

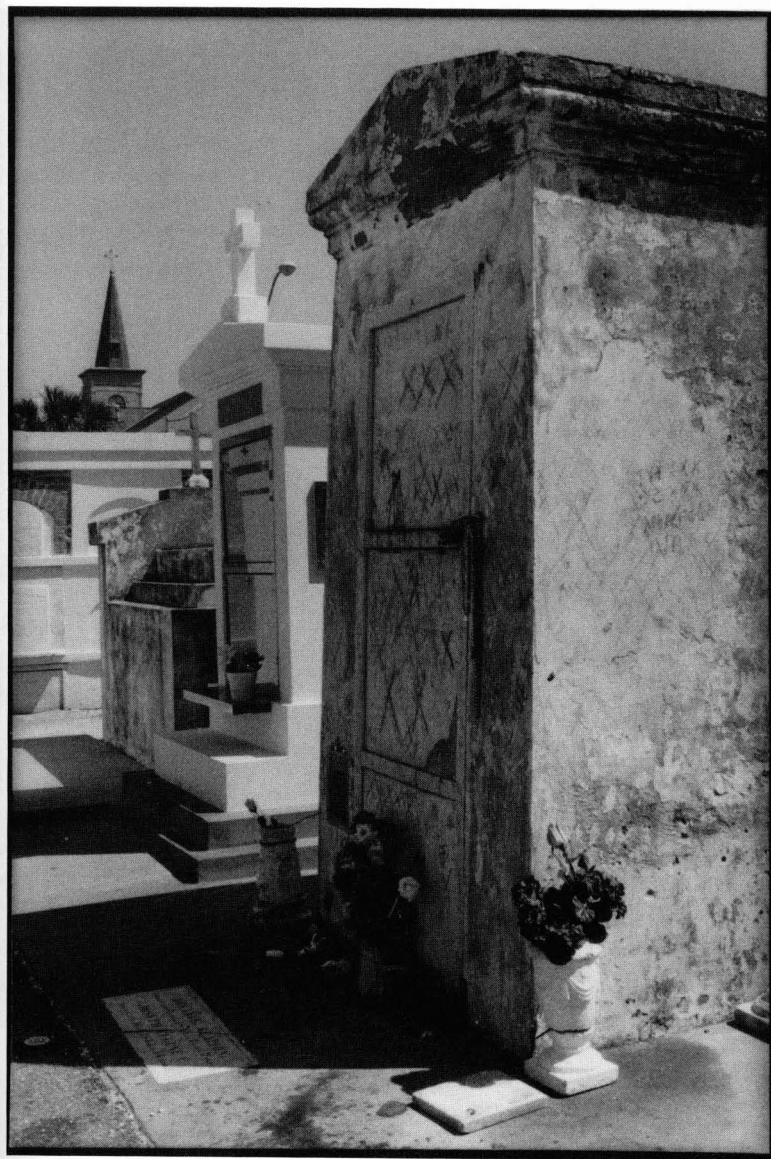




2. Gravesite of Amanda Carroll decorated for St. Valentine's Day, February 13, 1986. The photocopied portrait was smaller, and therefore more distinct, than in subsequent years.

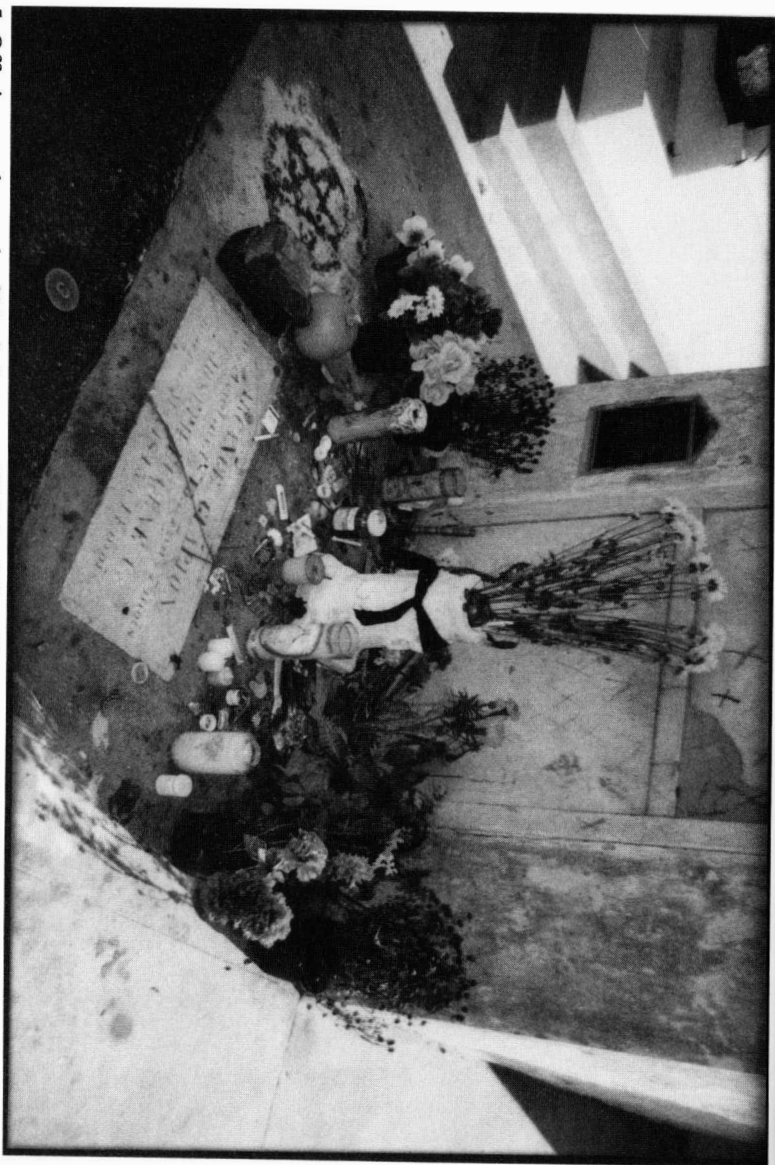


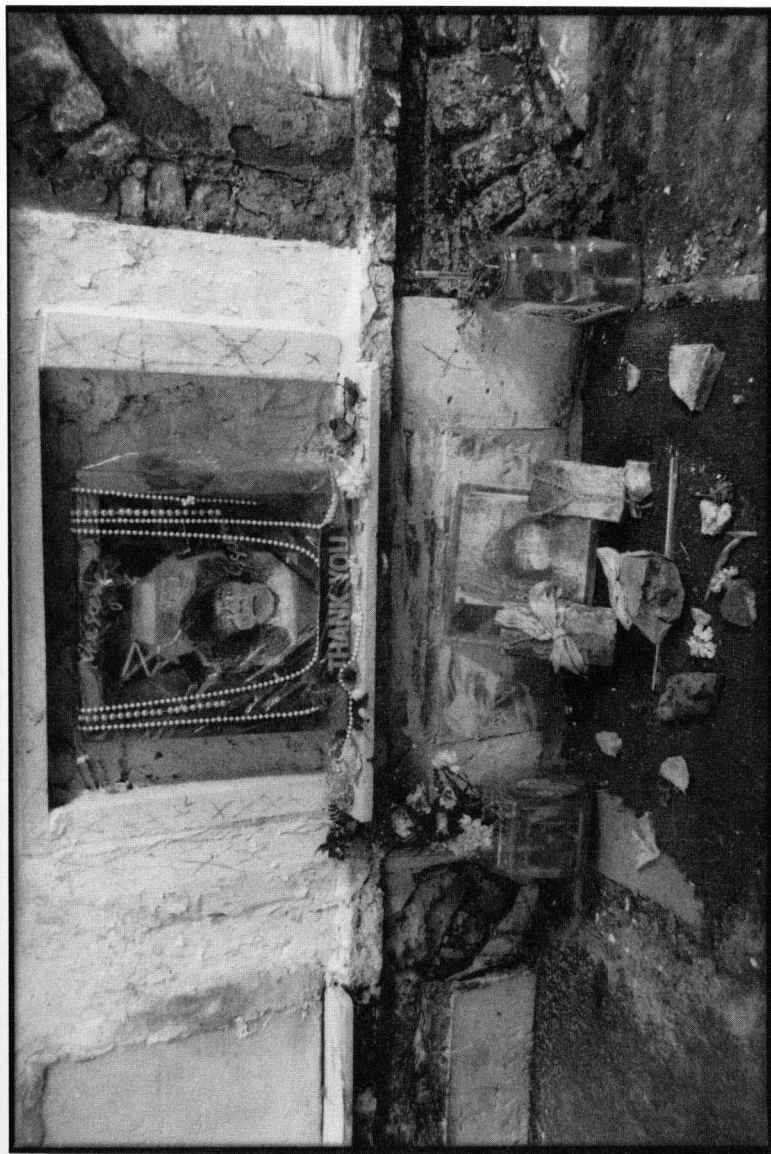
3. Gravesite of Amanda Carroll, Carnival Season, February 23, 1990. X marks are faintly visible on the wall above the vault.



4. Tomb of Marie Laveau, St. Louis Cemetery Number One, with X marks and offerings, April 5, 1996.

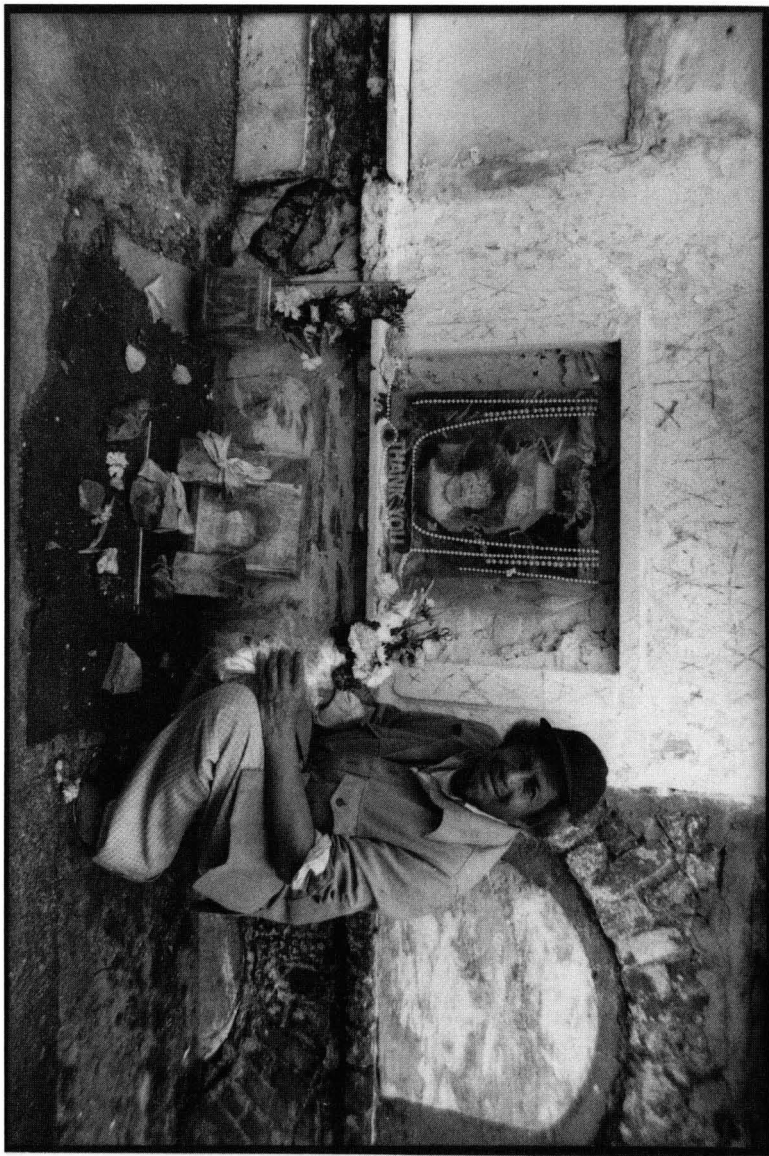
5. Offerings at the tomb of Marie Laveau, All Saints' Day, November 1, 1993.

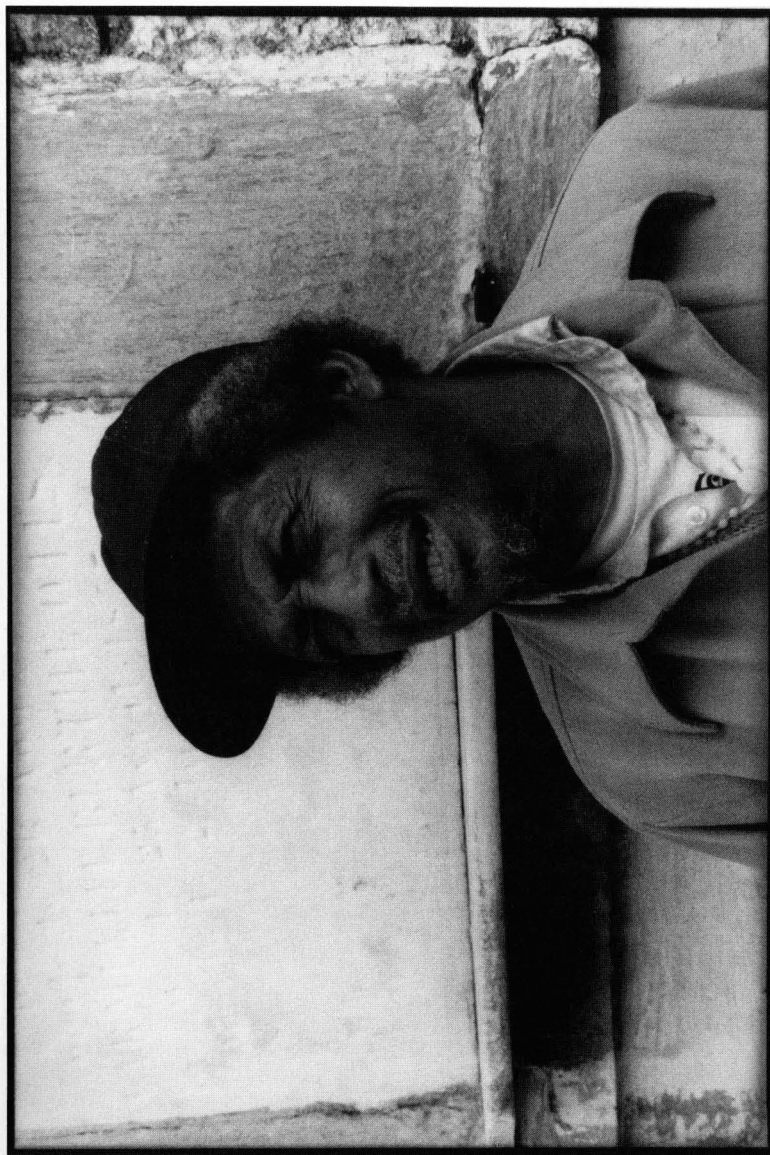




6. Gravesite of Amanda Carroll, St. Joseph's and St. Patrick's Day Celebration, March 18, 1991. The Xs have become more numerous, and there are also some cross marks.

7. Arthur Raymond Smith at the gravesite of his grandmother, March 18, 1991.

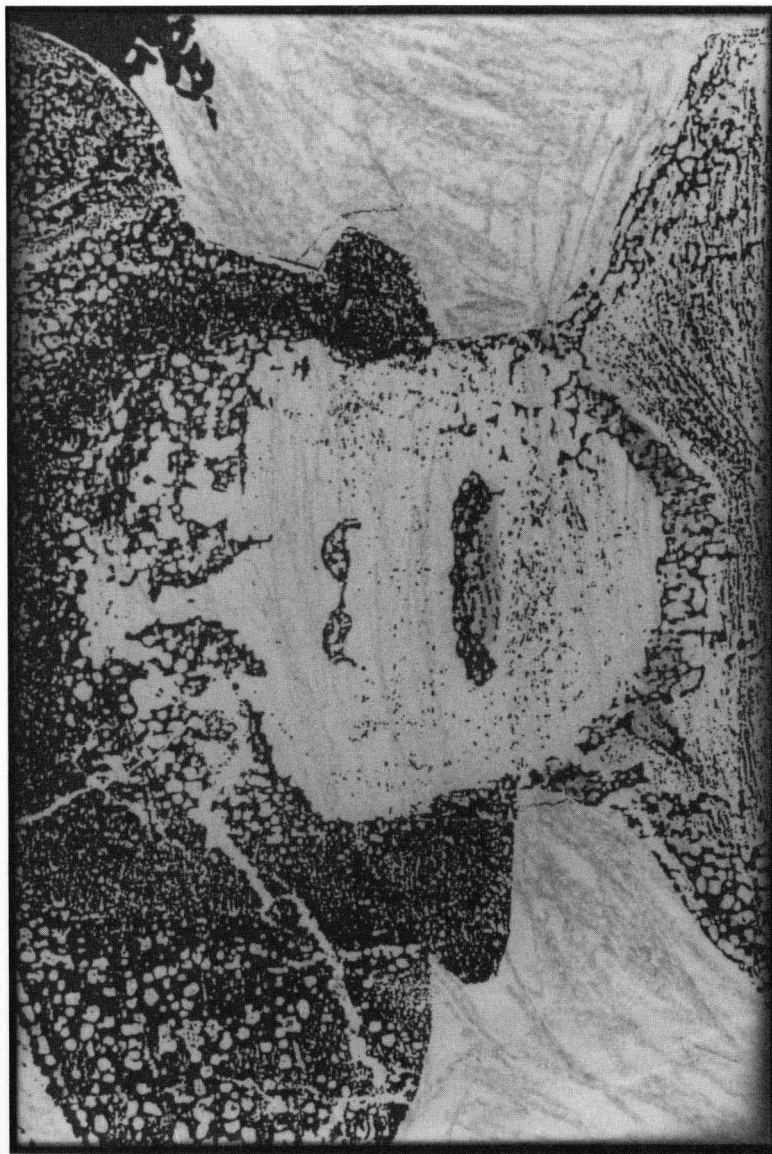




8. Arthur Smith, March 18, 1991.

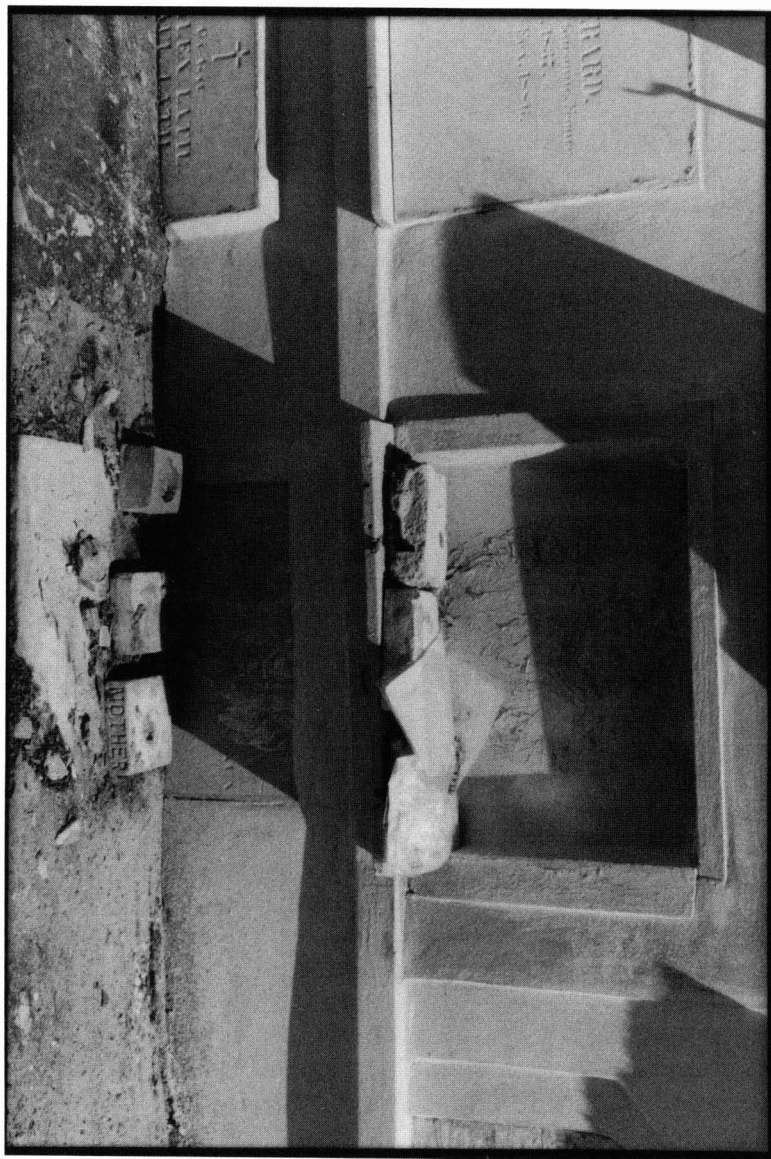


9. Gravesite of Amanda Carroll, All Saints' Day, November 1, 1993. The photocopied portraits of Ethel Boswell Davis and Arthur Smith are on the sidewalk below the tomb. A nail is placed diagonally across each portrait.



10. Detail, hand colored, enlarged, photocopied portrait of Amanda Carroll, November 1, 1993. Over the years, successive photocopying and enlarging of the original studio portrait have made the image increasingly abstract.

11. On April 25, 1996, Amanda Carroll's gravesite was almost bare.

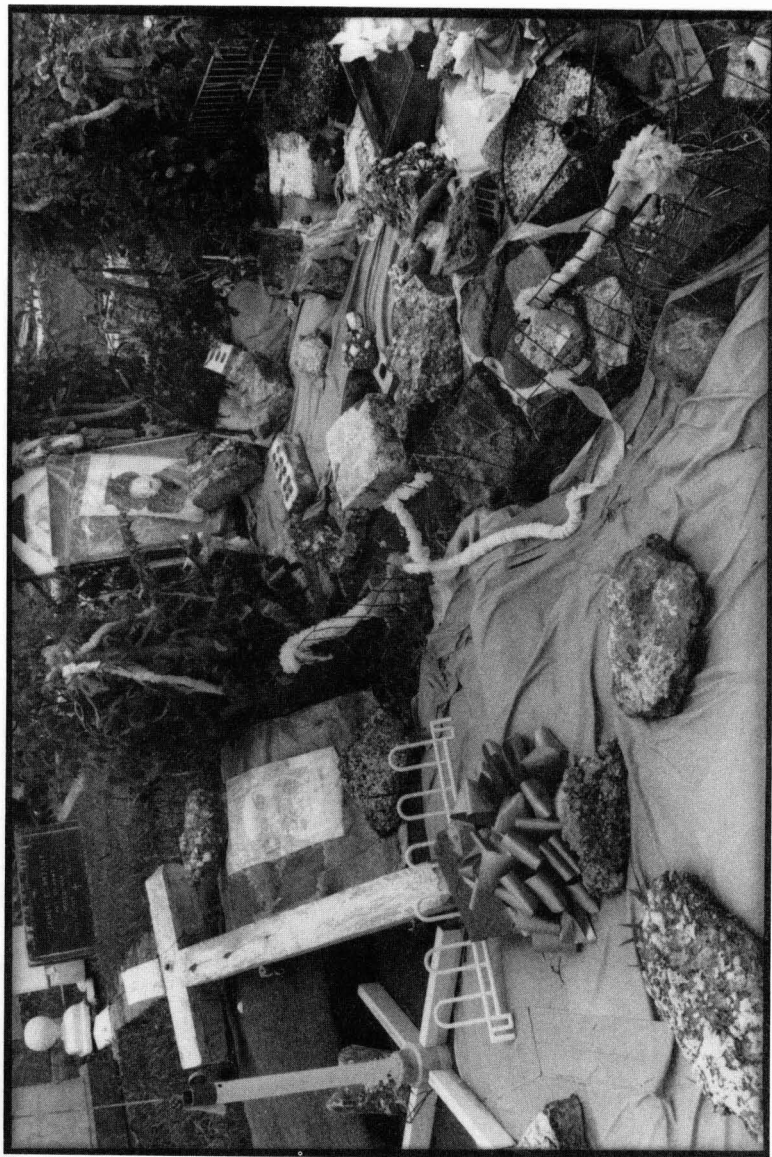




12. Gravesite of Amanda Carroll painted purple, May 22, 1997.



13. Portraits of Amanda Carroll and Ethel Boswell Davis, May 22, 1997.



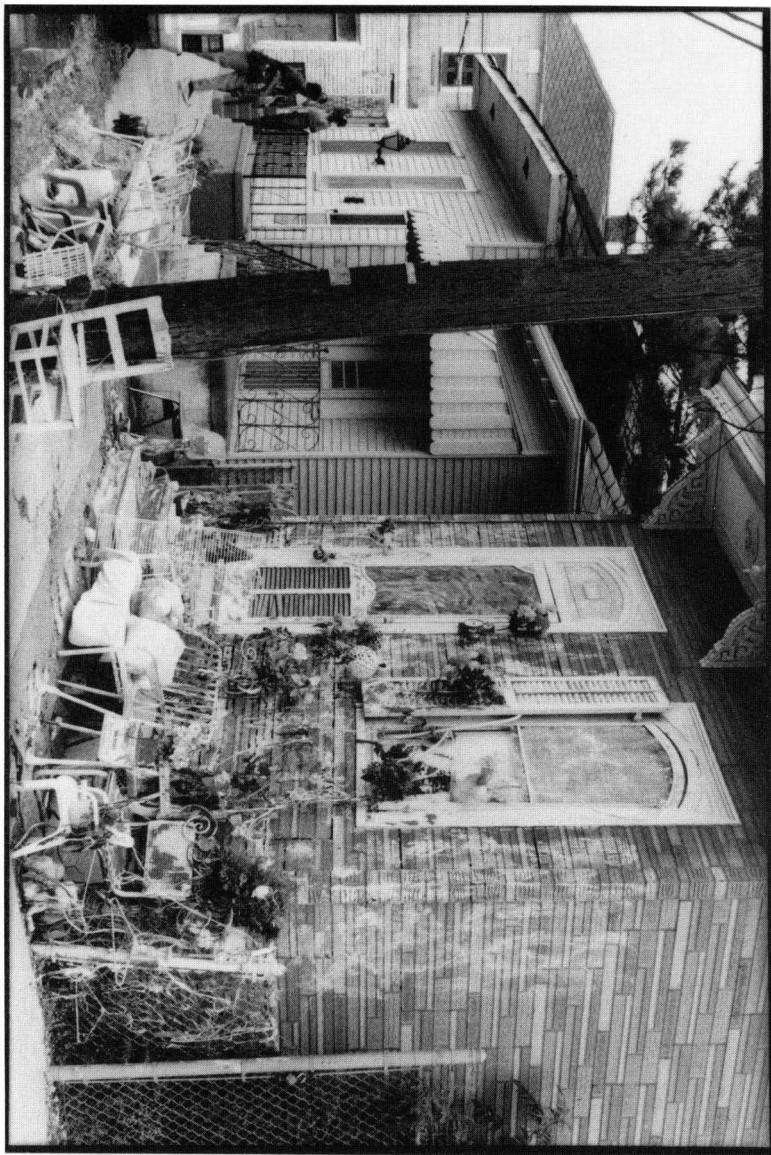
14. Double gravesite of Ethel Boswell Davis and Arthur Smith, Carrollton Cemetery, May 21, 1997.

15. Gravesite of Ethel Boswell Davis, Carrollton Cemetery, May 21, 1997.





16. Gravesite decorated by Arthur Smith, Holt Cemetery, May 21, 1997.



17. Arthur Smith's house, May 25, 1997.